

Ostracism at Athens

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Imagine if we could vote every year in a referendum to banish one of our politicians from the country for a considerable length of time. Of course, though politicians can be disgraced easily enough, such an action would be unthinkable today. Yet classical Athens did this to many of its politicians. They called it ostracism, regarded it as an essential part of the democracy and what is more, they voted every year on whether to have one. Each Athenian citizen could vote for the man he most wanted to be 'ostracized' by scratching the name of his candidate on a sherd of pottery, an 'ostrakon', which was the ancient equivalent of cheap paper. Provided 6,000 votes in all had been cast in the ballot box, the politician who received the most votes would then be exiled from Athens and its surrounding territory for ten years. Ten years is a long time for an ambitious politician.

More than a ballot paper

Thousands of these ostraka have now been found, some thrown away in the Agora of Athens, and about 9,000 have recently been unearthed in the potters' quarter known as the Kerameikos. In a sense, this is like finding the original ballot papers for the ostracisms, but these sherds are a great deal more exciting than modern ballot papers. Whereas the modern voter just adds his cross to a printed list of names already written out for him, the Athenian had much more scope for individuality, eccentricity and sheer abuse. The format of these ostraka varies immensely: sometimes you just get the one name, say 'Themistocles' (the prominent general of the Persian Wars); sometimes a more elaborate identification, including his place of origin; in other cases fascinating additional comments about the 'candidate' and why he deserves ostracism, other graffiti and drawings to hammer the point home. In addition to all this are spelling variations, mistakes, very hesitant attempts at writing, and barely literate scrawls. These little sherds, preserved only because pottery is virtually indestructible, give us a rare and often poignant insight into the life of the ordinary citizen, his political participation, his views on politicians and even his ability to write.

Ostracism was instituted by Cleisthenes in about 508 B.C. alongside various other reforms which created the early form of democracy which lay behind the radical democracy of fifth century classical Athens. Surprisingly, it does not seem to have been used for twenty years, for the first successful ostracism was that of a certain Hipparchus, in 487, shortly after the first Persian expedition. Several others followed in that same decade. The last was during the Peloponnesian War, that of a demagogue Hyperbolus (417), and then its use seems to have lapsed. We are told by Plutarch that Hyperbolus was the victim of a cunning political manoeuvre, because the two main candidates for ostracism managed to unite and deflect

the votes against a third. The custom may have lapsed precisely because this kind of manipulation was thought to undermine its true aim.

The threat of tyranny

What was its aim, then? What was the point of ostracism if it was not used for twenty years, and how could it be associated with democracy? Ostracism was probably aimed originally at anyone who was becoming dangerously influential and might try to make himself sole ruler or tyrant of Athens. Here the historical background to Cleisthenes' reforms is crucial. The Athenians – with Spartan help – had just expelled their tyrants, the Peisistratids. A rather messy period of political struggle followed between Cleisthenes and another aristocrat. Cleisthenes gained the upper hand by appealing to the people, then he got expelled himself on the grounds that his family was under a curse. Though later Athenians looked back proudly at this period as one of the triumph of democracy and the defeat of tyranny, it was still far from clear that Athens was now free from tyranny or its old tyrants. Ostracism must have been introduced, then, as a way of giving the people the chance to remove an ambitious politician and potential tyrant in such a way that he could have very little influence in Athens.

Cleisthenes himself was a master of astute political manoeuvres and he could have used the ostracism law to emphasize that he was not going to become a tyrant either. Ostracism was probably abandoned after 417 either because its aim was no longer being achieved, or because there was no longer a real threat of tyranny. In other words, ostracism was thought to be an important democratic institution partly because Athens' democracy had developed in reaction to tyranny. It was also by definition a safeguard against individual politicians rather than parties, and that emphasizes too how Athenian politics was dominated by individuals, not political parties in the modern sense.

Rude messages

Some of the most intriguing ostraka correspond to the years when ostracism was first used in earnest in the 480's, the decade between the first expedition made by the Persians against Greece, defeated at the battle of Marathon, and the second expedition of 480-79; or to the years shortly after the Persian defeat. For instance, a politician named Megacles prominent in the 480's, from the same family as Cleisthenes who introduced ostracism, is accused of everything from adultery, the Alcmaeonid family curse, love of money and horse-rearing, to other more obscure faults. He was actually ostracized in 486. Another voter wanting to ostracize Themistocles sarcastically wrote that his sherd was 'in honour' of Themistocles (who was eventually ostracized in the 460's). A certain Kallixenos was completely unknown to modern historians until the excavations brought up so many ostraka cast against him in the 480's that it became clear he was extremely prominent. One called

him 'Kallixenos the traitor', another was made by a potter, specially painted and fired in a kiln for the occasion.

Similarly a man named Kallias son of Kratios emerges from obscurity since so many ostraka were cast against him. One citizen actually called him 'Kallias the Mede' – accusing him, that is, of being pro-Persian in the period when Athens was at war with the Persians. Another added a spirited caricature of Kallias dressed as a Persian, equipped with trousers, pointed shoes and pointed cap. He was probably the 'friend of the tyrants' ostracized in 485. Another politician with a reputation for being upright, Aristides, nicknamed 'the Just', gets accused of being pro-Persian and cruel to suppliants, and he was in fact exiled in 482. Most elaborate is the sherd cast against the father of Pericles, the great politician of the later 5th. c., which says in verse 'This ostrakon says that Xanthippus son of Ariphron does most wrong of all the cursed leaders'. It is uncertain what this means precisely, but the cynicism is clear!

Rough justice for Aristides

So we see a preoccupation with treachery and friendship with the Persians appropriate in the period of hostility between Greeks and Persians. 'Friendship with the tyrants' was related, for some members of the family of the Athenian tyrants recently expelled had gone over to the side of the Persians. The family of Cleisthenes himself was under a curse, so this surfaces in the ostraka. As for the more personal abuse, it reminds us that supposed personal shortcomings have long been a means of political criticism. An anecdote preserved by Plutarch about an illiterate man suggests that some people were less than politically motivated. An illiterate man needs someone to write his ostrakon for him: unknowingly he happens to pick the famous politician Aristides and he asks him to write Aristides on it. 'Oh, why?', asks Aristides. The man admits that he does not know Aristides at all, but is just so tired of hearing him called 'the Just'.

Writing an Ostrakon

Ostracism may also tell us about the writing skills and literacy levels of the average citizen of Athens. Were all Athenians able to read and write, then? It is often thought that when he introduced ostracism, Cleisthenes must have assumed that every citizen would therefore be able to write a name on a sherd. This might seem quite straightforward: in fact if you compare ostraka with modern ballot papers, it is the modern ones which make more allowance for the semi-literate, since they need only a cross against a name. But there are a surprising number of difficulties with this idea. I have mentioned the story about Aristides and the illiterate voter, and that reminds us that someone who could not write could easily get someone else to do it for him. Modern illiterates are usually very anxious to hide the fact, but that can hardly have been the case in the late 6th and 5th centuries when most business and politics was done without writing. But it is also possible that the citizens who

could write with ease would be much more ready to vote than those who could not and who would need someone else to write for them. How can we know that Cleisthenes had not hoped to discourage the totally illiterate? Writing down your vote makes a secret ballot much easier, since your identity can be hidden better, but it can bring disadvantages.

As a further addition to the puzzle, the archaeologists have found a large collection of 190 ostraka against Themistocles, clearly prepared in advance. For these 190 ostraka have been written out by fourteen – and only fourteen – different hands. What can possibly lie behind them? Ballot stuffing, party organization, or fine ready-made ostraka for anyone who arrived at the vote without a prepared sherd? The last is most plausible, but perhaps wavering voters could be swayed by the ostraka already made to measure.

Semi-literate Greeks?

Even the ostraka themselves show that not everyone could write with ease. Some are quite illegible. In one ostrakon cast against Aristides you can see quite clearly that the writer began it at the top, rather faintly, couldn't finish the second word on the second line, and tried a third: then another person with a firmer hand crossed out the last word and added Aristides' father more legibly at the end.

Often the writing goes from right to left, not left to right, or even a mixture, twisting and turning 'as the ox ploughs'. These methods were once common in Greece but very old fashioned by the early fifth century: perhaps they were continued by old men or, more likely, the writing of ordinary citizens lagged behind the official writing style of the public inscriptions. One ostrakon, against Themistocles, starts at the bottom and twists round backwards (i.e. from right to left) in a sort of spiral round the sherd – and he spells the name Themisthacles.

Others make spelling mistakes or fizzle out before the end of the word – almost as if they could not work out the endings of the word! Most ostraka look markedly less professional than the beautiful ostraka mass-produced against Themistocles. So perhaps, after all, many Athenians found it hard to write their ostraka and were grateful for one ready-made. In fact, perhaps this was one of the few times some Athenians wrote anything at all.

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